

CHANTING THE SIMPLE DIALOGUES OF THE MASS: NOT JUST FOR PRIESTS WHO “LIKE TO SING”

The introduction of the revised translation of the *Roman Missal* presents both challenges and opportunities. One of the opportunities is to introduce the chanting of the simple dialogues—especially between the priest and the rest of the assembly. But it is possible that the majority of priests will not take advantage of this opportunity because they do not normally sing the Preface or the other presidential prayers of the liturgy, and they may likewise leave the chanting of the dialogues to those priests “who like to sing.”

Even though they both involve singing, the chanting of extended prayers and the chanting of simple dialogues have different purposes and dynamics. The chanting of a prayer involves only the priest and his decision about how to most effectively proclaim a text using his particular gifts and talents. But the chanting of a dialogue involves both priest and congregation in a dynamic exchange. The chanting of prayers may be limited by ability, preference, or occasion, but the chanting of the dialogues should be a part of almost every Mass.

Even though this practice has been encouraged in most official liturgical documents, it is not common in most of our parishes--with the exception of the concluding doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer. One of the reasons for this might be that the highly influential document, *Music in Catholic Worship* (1972), did not encourage or even mention the chanting of the dialogues. However, its successor, *Sing to the Lord: Music in Divine Worship* (2007) highly recommends it:

Among the parts to be sung, preference should be given “especially to those to be sung by the priest or the deacon or the lector, with the people responding...” This includes dialogues such as...*The Lord be with you. And also with you.*

The dialogues of the Liturgy are fundamental because they “are not simply outward signs of communal celebration but foster and bring about communion between priest and people.” By their nature, they are short and uncomplicated and easily invite active participation by the entire assembly.

Every effort should therefore be made to introduce or strengthen as a normative practice the singing of the dialogues...Even the priest with a very limited singing ability is capable of chanting *The Lord be with you* on a single pitch. (#115; Quotations are from the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #34 and #40)

Here is a list of these dialogues during the Mass:

INTRODUCTORY RITES

1. Sign of the Cross and Greeting (Priest)
2. Conclusion to the Penitential Act (Priest)
3. Conclusion to the Collect (Priest)

LITURGY OF THE WORD

4. Acclamation and Response after the Reading(s) (Lector or Cantor)
5. Gospel: Introductory Dialogue and Concluding Acclamation/Response (Deacon or Priest)

LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST (Priest)

6. Conclusion to the Prayer over the Offerings
7. Preface: Opening Dialogue
8. Introduction to the Memorial Acclamation
9. Eucharistic Prayer: Concluding Doxology/Amen
10. Prayer for Peace: Concluding Dialogue
11. Conclusion to the Prayer after Communion

CONCLUDING RITES

12. Greeting and Blessing (Priest)
13. Dismissal (Deacon or Priest)

(Note: The revised *Roman Missal* also provides chants for the *Orate Fratres* and the Invitation to Communion, but this list does not include them because their responses are considerably longer and more complex than the other dialogues.)

CHANTING THE DIALOGUES: WHAT WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT---

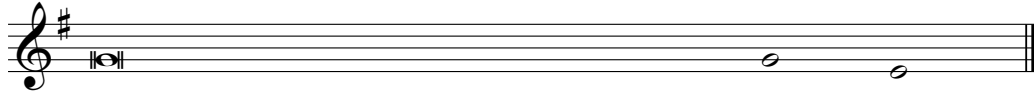
1. We are not expecting the priest (or the deacon or lector) to sound like the cantor. This is a different ministry, and the music assigned to the cantor is often more demanding. That is why it is probably better to use the term “chanting” rather than “singing” when referring to the dialogues. And to a priest or deacon who says, “I can’t (or won’t) *sing*,” a good response would be: “But you can (and should) *chant*. If you can speak, you can chant!”
2. As mentioned above, we are not expecting *all* priests to chant the more extended texts of the Preface and the other presidential prayers, even though some may choose to do so depending on the occasion. This is a crucial point. The key question for the priest is, “How can I best *proclaim* these prayers; by chanting or by spoken proclamation?” Some have noted that the more formal style of the revised translation may lend itself to chanting while others have pointed out that the long sentences may instead demand more nuanced spoken proclamation.

Sing to the Lord also makes it clear that since they involve dialogues, the conclusions to the Opening Prayer, Prayer over the Gifts, and Prayer after Communion may be chanted even if the prayers themselves are recited. (#151, #175, #197) This is already the common practice for the conclusion to the Eucharistic Prayer.

3. We are not *necessarily* talking about using the dialogue chants exactly as they will appear in the main body of the revised missal. Even now, some priests do use the chant for the concluding doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer just as it appears in current *Sacramentary* since it is similar to the tone used for the Preface. But many more use a simpler chant:



Through Him, with Him, in Him in the unity of the Ho - ly Spir - it.



All glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ev - er.

This is similar to what is called the “simple tone” that appears (and will appear) in the *Appendix* of the Missal and is often used by those who chant the Opening Prayer and other presidential prayers. For the most part, it involves chanting on “a single pitch” as described in *Sing to the Lord*, with just two slight variations:

- a slight downward “turn and return” midway through the phrase (“Holy Spirit”);
- a downward “fall” at the conclusion. (a descending minor third; the “doorbell” interval).

If a priest can chant this simple doxology—or something close to it—he can also chant any dialogue using the “simple tone.”

This tone also has the advantage of providing an easier response for the rest of the assembly. Except for the *Amen* that stays on a single pitch, the tonal pattern of the response is usually in the form of a simple “echo.”

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO CHANTING THE DIALOGUES

1. *It seems “unnatural.”* For those not used to the practice, it will take some getting used to. In some ways, this is a cultural issue. We do not chant such texts in other contexts. But neither do we wear special clothing dating from Roman times. And remember that we are not necessarily talking about chanting *extended* texts.
2. *It is too formal.* Our liturgy *is* more formal than informal. This has been a difficult lesson for some people to learn after the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. The liturgy is no one’s “property.” It is the action of Christ and His Body, the Church.
3. *It draws too much attention to the priest.* Once the priest and the congregation get used to the practice, they will likely experience just the opposite. The chanting will put them on a more “equal footing” and draw them closer in unity.

4. *It excludes some of the people who will not (or cannot) sing.* Again, a person who can speak can also sing—or at least chant—even if it is not exactly “on pitch.” When we ask our people to sing together, we are challenging them to do something quite countercultural. In our society, we too readily divide people into singers (“performers”) and non-singers (“audience”). Nevertheless, even those who will not pick up a song book will usually manage to chant a simple *Amen* or *And with your spirit*.

REASONS FOR CHANTING THE DIALOGUES

1. *It helps our communal prayer to be more intentional and “on purpose.”*
Generally, it takes more breath and energy to chant a dialogue than it does to speak it.
2. *It helps our communal response to be stronger and more sustained.* Even in a large group, a spoken response such as *Amen* or *We lift them up to the Lord* can come across as a weak “mumble.” Chanting can give it more strength and “weight.”
3. *It unifies our response.* Have you ever stood next to someone in church who always finishes the spoken responses before everyone else? It is much harder to do this when chanting. Also, people naturally speak on a variety of pitch levels, but when they chant, the pitches are the same—at least for the most part! Many voices become one.
4. *It will assist in the introduction of the revised texts.* This is a very practical reason. When implementing the revised missal, if a priest or a deacon who normally recites *The Lord be with you* begins to chant it instead, this can help to signal and facilitate the change in the people’s response. Chanting also lends itself to the more “formal” nature of the revised response, *And with your spirit*.
5. *It helps to “foster and bring about communion between priest and people.”*
(*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #34)
When the dialogues are spoken, the sound of the people’s response is usually quite different from the priest’s proclamation. Most priests attempt to proclaim strongly using an “elevated” pitch in their speech, but the people usually respond in a weaker voice and on a lower pitch level. Chanting enables the proclamation and the response to be more closely matched, both in strength and in pitch level—to be more “in communion.” Far from distancing himself from the congregation, the priest who chants the dialogues is helping them to “give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him.” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #95)

In short, chanting simple dialogues is not about whether priests, deacons, or readers like to sing or even sing particularly well. It is about helping the whole Body of Christ to fully celebrate the liturgy together with strength and enthusiasm.

-Charles Gardner